



UNDERSTANDING COMPETENCIES IN THE USGS

Just when you thought you knew that jobs were made up of skills and abilities, they changed the language and said let's talk about competencies. What is that all about?

Just what is a competency and how does it differ from our traditional description of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) in a job series?

Competency language recognizes that success in a position requires more than just great KSAs. It also includes the interpersonal skills and behaviors necessary for success. It has been best defined as:

“An observable, measurable pattern of skills, knowledge, abilities, behaviors & other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully.”

The difference is in adding the behaviors that have to be aligned for success. Some of these we know as the “soft” interpersonal skills but others bring us the power of vision, integrity, honesty, decisiveness, problem solving and resilience.

So why is it important that we begin a dialogue on competencies?

One reason is that this is the direction the whole Federal Government is moving. That's a fine reason, but there are more compelling reasons for us to begin a conversation about competencies in the USGS.

Perhaps the most important point is that we begin to think about all of those other attributes our employees need to be successful.

But let's take this a step further. If we can define the KSAs and other behaviors for a job, then we can define them for any level of a position. And, we can show how the KSAs and other behaviors need to grow as you progress up a career ladder. In other words, you have a career roadmap.

It also means we can identify training and development opportunities to ensure that needed competencies are developed.

With that accomplished, we can provide support for managers at the point of hiring so that OARS and interview questions really ask about the full suite of critical position competencies.

What is in this for you as an employee?

Simply stated, you get a roadmap to plan your career and you have information that will guide you in acquiring the critical competencies you need for success

In addition, you get the information you need to address your own career questions. The roadmap will include all the details of how to get there and what skills, knowledge and competencies you need to develop if you want to be competitive for future openings.

What does this mean if you are a manager or supervisor? What's in it for you?

As a manager or supervisor you will know the core KSAs and behaviors of each level of the jobs you manage, plus, you will have a list of training and development opportunities to prepare employees for the next level of performance. With this powerful tool:

- o You have a roadmap for how you spend your limited training and development resources.
- o You will be able to help prepare your employees for the next step of their career and they will feel rewarded working for the USGS because they recognize that you are interested in their career advancement.
- o You can make sure that the organization is well positioned to succeed, even with the loss of critical staff, because you have been planning for succession.
- o You will know how to look for those other attributes and qualities through specific interview questions to ensure that you are getting the full suite of skills that you need when you have the opportunity to hire.

So what is the USGS doing to start this discussion?

In 2003, several managers raised the concern that we need to build the science and business management skills of our supervisory and management staff to meet the complex challenges facing the organization. They spoke of the increasing complexity of the work; the growing need for more external focus and collaboration; the concern about our demographics; and employee concerns in the Organizational Assessment Survey that said we were not adequately preparing for our future. They wanted to ensure the future success of the science and felt that having a roadmap for management succession was an essential part.

But first, they wanted to understand what makes a manager at any level successful. They already understood that science/technical skills and knowledge are central to success. They knew that leadership competencies provided a firm foundation for success. And, they knew that we needed more focus on science and business management competencies and that these were also key success factors.

They raised the big question – What are the core competencies for managers in the USGS and what do they look like at different levels of the organization? If these could be defined, they also wanted to know how we could prepare staff in the pipeline so they would be ready to move into increasingly more complex management positions.

So began the project “Core Competency Model for Managers” focusing on ***“Excellent Science Well Managed and Well Led”***.

What are the first steps in building a Core Competency Model for Managers (CCMM)?

A steering team of senior managers from each region was assembled to design the model. They knew that the CCMM would need to show an appropriate blend of science/technical competencies, leadership competencies, and science/business management competencies. They knew that the model would need to recognize that the degree to which these suites of competencies were used would vary within the organization, the disciplines and the levels of management (supervisor, middle manager, senior manager, and executive). In the end, however, everyone agreed that for our managers to

succeed, they needed a core suite of KSAs and behaviors in each of these areas.

Once the critical KSAs and behaviors for each level of management are identified, the next step is to identify the appropriate training or developmental activities that will support their growth. What we know is that we generally know how to build our science and technical competencies although it needs continual focus and support; we have developed ways to build our leadership competencies; and we need to increase the focus on the development of our science and business management skills by providing linkages to available training and development opportunities. With specific training identified, the roadmap will link specific competencies by level linked to developmental opportunities that will ensure management success.

Why is it important to the USGS?

Quite simply, our managers are entrusted with the future of the USGS and we all care about that future. Our success depends on having the best leaders and managers to support our mission Science. We want to make it possible for our people to have opportunities for career growth and to develop their potential to become the future leaders of the USGS.

The Core Competency Model for Managers is designed to create the roadmap for a career path in management and link to the tools and developmental opportunities that will guarantee success. But more importantly it is about succession planning. The model is designed to help build the competencies in the pool of eligible candidates that will make them competitive for higher level positions and at the same time, ensure they have the necessary skills and abilities to succeed if they are selected.

Why is this important to you?

All of the managers in the USGS know that they are about the science of the USGS. Some of you are managing the business or facility infrastructure that is essential to our business; others are leading the science. Everyone wants to ensure that the work of the USGS is making a difference to society. The USGS wants you to share your passion about the USGS and its work. Part of the USGS commitment to you is to give you the skills you need to be successful in every aspect of your work!